

## MEDITATION

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### What is Meditation?

Meditation is a mental practice designed to improve concentration, increase awareness in present surroundings, and familiarize yourself with the nature of your mind. While meditation can be dated back to 5000 BC and traced to Buddhist and Hindu religious origins, the practice has been on the rise in Western culture. Eight different types of meditation could be useful for practice related to your health:

**Samatha Meditation:** otherwise known as “calm” meditation, in which you calm your mind through quiet concentration and focus awareness on your breath, an image, or an object. Samatha meditation is a single-pointed practice in which you focus your attention on one thing at a time.

**Vipassana Meditation:** an insight meditation that emphasizes breath awareness by turning air in and out of your nose. This type of meditation teaches you how to label thoughts and experiences as they come up, taking mental notes as you identify objects that grab your attention.

**Mindful Meditation:** a category of meditation techniques used to create awareness and insight by practicing focused attention, observation, and acceptance of all that comes up without judgment. This type of meditation encourages “open monitoring,” in which you allow your attention to flow freely without judgment and attachment.

**Zen Meditation:** here, you focus on your breath and observe thoughts and experiences as they pass through your mind and environment. This meditation emphasizes focusing on your breath at the level of your belly and your posture while sitting.

**Raja Yoga:** otherwise known as “mental yoga” or Kriya yoga, this is the practice of concentrating on calming the mind and bringing it to one point of attention. It includes reciting mantras, breathing techniques, and meditation on energy centers of the body. Chakras are proposed energy centers in your body that correspond to certain nerve bundles and major organs. The seven main chakras run along your spine; they begin at the base of your spine and extend to the crown of your head.

**Love-Kindness Meditation:** the practice of sending loving-kindness to yourself, a loved one or friend, someone neutral in your life, a difficult person, and finally the universe. This meditation allows the meditator to cultivate feelings of benevolence towards themselves and others by mentally sending messages of love and kindness.



Meditation Practice.  
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**Transcendental Meditation:** a mantra-based practice in which the meditator recites a personal mantra that's purpose is to help settle the mind inward.

**Relaxation Response Meditation:** involves awareness and tracking of breath, or repetition of a word, short phrase, or prayer.

While most of these meditation techniques involve standing or sitting still, there are other ways to meditate. For example, various mind-body practices like yoga or tai chi also emphasize slow movements, controlled breathing, and mental focus. Different types of physical activity that require steady, repetitive motions are also beneficial when practicing meditation.

Finding a practice that works best for you takes time and confidence. It is important to practice daily and start small to build a successful foundation. Start with five minutes of meditation each day; scheduling a specific time will help keep you accountable. If you are practicing from home, set aside space for practice and surround the area with candles, flowers, incense, or any other objects that could help you focus. Some other meditation tips include:

- Sit comfortably with your back straight and navel drawing in toward the spine for support.
- Close your eyes and focus on the object(s) you have chosen.
- Breathe slowly, deeply, and gently.
- Keep your mind focused on the breath or object; if it wanders, steer it back towards the center.
- Breathe peace and stillness into your mind.

The goal of meditation is to keep your mind focused on the present moment and away from stress and distractions. However, distracting thoughts or situations will arise. The best way to handle these distracting thoughts is to acknowledge them, let them go, and return focus to your breathing.

**Try this beginner meditation as you read:**

1. Sit quietly and close your eyes. Breathe slowly.
2. Relax all muscles beginning with feet, legs, and thighs.
3. Squeeze and release your shoulders. Then, roll your neck gently to the left and right.
4. On each exhale, say the word "peace" out loud or to yourself.
5. When thoughts wander, do not get discouraged. Return to the pattern.
6. Continue for 5-10 minutes, or as long as it feels comfortable.

## **Breathing Techniques**

All types of meditation focus on stabilizing your breath and bringing attention and awareness to each inhale and exhale. Deep breathing practices are a great way to lower stress in the body because they send your brain a message to relax. When you breathe deep, you stimulate the body's parasympathetic nervous system responsible for resting and digesting. Becoming more mindful about your breath can improve your relaxation response and meditation practice. Try one of the breathing techniques below when trying to relax.

### **Belly Breathing**

1. Sit or lie flat in a comfortable position.
2. Place one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest.

3. Take a deep breath in through your nose and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest should not move.
4. Breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Feel the hand on your belly go down and use it to push the remaining air out gently.
5. Repeat this pattern 3 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath.
6. Take a moment to pause and notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

## Roll Breathing

1. Put your left hand on your belly and your right hand on your chest. Notice how your hands move as you breathe in and out.
2. Practice filling your lower lungs by breathing so that your “belly” (left) hand goes up when you inhale, and your “chest” (right) hand remains still. Always breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Repeat 8 to 10 times.
3. When you have filled and emptied your lower lungs 8 to 10 times, add the second step to your breathing: inhale first into your lower lungs as before, and then continue inhaling into your upper chest. Breathe slowly and regularly. As you do so, your right hand will rise, and your left hand will fall a little as your belly falls.
4. As you exhale slowly through your mouth, make a quiet, whooshing sound as first your left hand, then your right-hand, fall. As you exhale, feel the tension leaving your body while you become more relaxed.
5. Practice breathing in and out in this way for 3 to 5 minutes. Notice that the movement of your belly and chest rises and falls like the motion of rolling waves.
6. Pause for a moment and notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

**Tip:** Practice roll breathing daily for a few weeks until you can perform it comfortably. Then, you can use it for instant relaxation anytime you need it.

***Important Note:** Some people get dizzy when practicing this technique. If you begin breathing too fast or feel lightheaded, slow your breathing and comfortably sit until you feel normal again.*

## Morning Breathing

1. From a standing position, bend forward from the waist with your knees slightly bent, letting your arms dangle.
2. As you inhale slowly and deeply, return to a standing position by rolling up one vertebra of the spine at a time, lifting your chin and head last.
3. Hold your breath for a few seconds in this standing position.
4. Slowly exhale as you return to the original position, hinging from the waist.
5. Pause and notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

## 4-7-8 Breathing

1. Place one hand on your belly and the other on your chest as in the belly breathing exercise.
2. Take a deep, slow breath from your belly, and silently count to 4 as you breathe in.
3. Hold your breath, and silently count from 1 to 7.

4. Breathe out completely as you silently count from 1 to 8. Try to get all the air out of your lungs by the time you count to 8.
5. Repeat 3 to 7 times or until you feel calm.
6. Pause for a moment and notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

## **Straw-Breathing Exercise**

1. Inhale normally and naturally.
2. Form your mouth into a straw shape and exhale, releasing all the air from your lungs.
3. Inhale normally (not through straw-shape).
4. Exhale entirely with your mouth in straw-shape.
5. Repeat for 5 minutes, or until calm.

## **How Can Meditation Help Me?**

Suppose you have elevated stress levels, high blood pressure, or greater risk for heart disease. In that case, meditation may be a good option for managing the associated physical and emotional symptoms.

## **Stress & Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)**

Meditation may be associated with lowering blood pressure. Hypertension can develop due to poor diet, lack of exercise, family history, stress, and many other factors. Often, the impact of everyday events that elevate our stress levels is overlooked as a contributing factor to hypertension. This stress can become dangerous for our health as it accumulates and becomes chronic. Our natural response to any stress is called the “fight or flight” response, which releases stress hormones (such as cortisol, adrenaline, and norepinephrine) into the body and elevates heart rate and blood pressure to prepare it for potential threats. Chronic stress prevents this response from “shutting off”; thus, our body remains prepared for a threat that is not there. This constant state of alertness in the body may lead to hypertension.

Meditation is an excellent tool for lowering high blood pressure and turning off our stress response. It activates our rest response and digestive functions while also soothing the nerves and decreasing inflammation in the body. A 2013 study published by the American Heart Association found that, on average, daily meditation practices lowered systolic blood pressure by 4.7 mm Hg and diastolic blood pressure by 3.2 mm Hg. Deep breathing techniques aid this process by slowing your breathing rate, lowering cortisol production, and redirecting stressful thoughts to give us a greater perspective of our situation.

Another study completed by Dr. Herbert Benson and published *Harvard Health Publishing* found that meditation was more likely to control hypertension in elderly participants who previously experienced difficulties with other hypertension treatments. The study also found these participants were more likely to reduce and potentially eliminate hypertension medications from their treatment plan. Further research published by *Penn Medicine* also indicates that when blood pressure falls, inflammation inside the body and blood vessel constriction becomes less active, resulting in a widening of blood vessels. This allows blood to flow more freely throughout the body and puts less stress on the heart, thus reducing hypertension.

## **Cardiovascular Disease**

Individuals with hypertension are also at an increased risk for cardiovascular disease. Cardiovascular disease is about 40% to 60% more common in individuals who reported chronic, or long-term, stress. The University of Minnesota found that those who reported constantly feeling under strain and unable to cope with daily stress were more likely to die of heart disease. Meditation provides a new coping technique for

those who feel constantly overwhelmed. A 5-year study reported by the British Heart Foundation asked 201 patients with Coronary Heart Disease to practice transcendental meditation for 15 minutes a day; they found that those patients reduced their risk of death, heart attack, and stroke by 45%. The study also found that meditation was associated with lowered blood pressure and stress, and those who practiced felt more balanced long-term. By focusing on breathing and redirecting negative thoughts, meditation offers a counterbalance for heightened physical responses to daily tolls.

Meditation can also help increase our Heart Rate Variability (HRV). HRV refers to how quickly your heart makes small changes in the time interval between heartbeats. The higher the HRV, the healthier the heart. A 2013 study by the American Heart Association found that low HRV is associated with a 45% increased risk of heart attack and stroke in those with cardiovascular disease. However, with regular meditation, increasing HRV is possible. The same study found that participants who completed 5 minutes of daily meditation consistently for 10 days had a better HRV than participants who did not. In addition, a study from The Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that daily meditation was associated with a 49% lower risk of coronary artery disease, a 24% lower risk of stroke, and a 14% lower risk of high blood pressure.

## Additional Benefits of Meditation

- Quieting your mind and being more present.
- Improving memory, attention, and focus.
- Increasing productivity.
- Increasing contentment and decreasing depression.
- Managing negative emotions, physical pain, and addiction.
- Increasing energy and self-esteem.
- Improving sleeping patterns.
- Creating deeper levels of relaxation.

Overall, meditation offers a great way to refocus your mind and attention away from stress and negative thoughts towards a more purposeful consciousness. In time, practicing meditation can become a natural part of your routine and allow a reprieve from daily hassles. It creates a safe space for your mind and body, enables you to relax, and helps you develop a better understanding of yourself and your surroundings. Breathing techniques used in various practices also provide more structure for both the mind and body by requiring your attention to focus on something specific and tangible. Aside from the mental and emotional benefits, those who practice daily meditation may also experience physical rewards such as lowered blood pressure and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease. Consistent practices are key to receiving the potential benefits of any meditation practice, and these physical benefits are often a result of long-term practices.

For more information regarding stress management, mental health, and activity, see [HGIC 4368, \*Stress Management\*](#), [HGIC 4374, \*Mental Health and Diabetes\*](#), and [HGIC 4375, \*Activity and Exercise\*](#).

For more information on beginning a meditation practice, see [UCLA Health Guided Meditations](#)

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